DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 102 577 CS 201 870

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TITLE "Sure, I Like Poetry . . . (Sigh) . . . Rod McKuen!"
PUB DATE Nov 74
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (Washington, D. C., Oct. 31-Nov. 2, 1974); Poems have been deleted due to copyright restrictions

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Content Analysis; *Literary Criticism; Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; *Poets; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS *McKuen (Rod)

ABSTRACT

This paper describes Rod McKuen's theories of poetic composition, arguing that McKuen appeals to the anti-intellectual, blindly sentimental capacities of the American public. A comparison of McKuen's work with the work of such poets as James Dickey, Robert Lowell, and Theodore Roethke is outlined in order to demonstrate to students the superficial aspects of McKuen's poetry. Several of McKuen's poems, including "They," "Heroes," "Plan," and "Lonesome Cities," are critically analyzed. (TS)

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FRESHMAN ENGLISH (SAMLA, 1974)

ABSTRACT

"Sure, I Like Poetry . . . (sigh) . . . Rod McKuen!"--Robert W. Hill, Clemson University.

Rod McKuen has touched the anti-intellectual, the escapist, the superficial, the blindly sentimental capacities of the American public. But we can't just duck and say, "There ain't no accounting for taste," because tastes can be modified,and we are teachers. We must answer the McKuen advocates by tough-minded comparisons with good contemporary poets, pointing out where Dickey, Lowell, Roethke and others speak clearly but richly about the real world and its resistance to categories, its ultimate rejection of false sentiment.

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"SURE, I LIKE POETRY. . . (sigh) . . . ROD McKUEN!"

Many teachers of Freshman English have asked me, "What do you do about/ or with/ or to Rod McKuen?" Normally, I've thrown up my hands and said, "Maybe one day 'they'll' learn better." But, since 'they' are not just the young or the uneducated, my upthrown hands have not satisfied me or my questioners. So now--in a righteous, if not quite intrepid, spirit--I've doubled my fists.

Professor Morse Peckham has regularly declared that if some form of art upsets you, you'd better watch out because it's working on you, changing your perspective against your will in a way that genuinely inferior art, which you could simply ignore, would not. Professor Peckham's idea itself troubles me, since for several years I've nurtured my growing anger at the acceptance of Rod McKuen as a poet. Doubtless, he is the all-time best peddler of passages purported to be poetry, but the small step some people take from observing and admiring his financial success to calling him a poet is almost beneath comment. At least, I've felt so until now, when I've decided to comment.

In general I'm rarely as snobbish about art as I am about McKuen's work. ~~I like rock music if it's imaginative and not just loud; and I like some bluegrass, although my taste runs to opera and late Beethoven quartets.~~ I even like Ogden Nash. But now I find myself defensive, in the unenviable--perhaps

the untenable--position of sturm und drang against this placidity, so that my raging--no matter how muscular or logical it might want to be--must surely sound uncontrolled. (You see, I'm trapped by Peckham's principle. It's like trying to fight a Freudian: if you love or hate your father or mother, it's Oedipal.) To attack the work of Rod McKuen in this day of his victory, of his million-flooding books and albums, puts me too slickly into the category of The Grinch Who Stole Christmas. I come across as the frustrated English prof whose freshmen read and listen to more of THE WARM than they ever will the really good contemporary poets. And much less can I expect them to read on their own the works of Keats, or Donne, or Shakespeare, or--God help us all-John Milton.

But to enter the fray, let's start with some of McKuen's poetic theory, as articulated in his recent appearance on the ETV program, "Book Beat." He said,

> Poetry is not like writing a novel. Poets are lazy people, I think--probably one of the reasons why I do a lot of different things, because you can't really go to the typewriter or go to a piece of paper and say, I'm going to write a poem. I think the people who do that are the unsuccessful poets. You have got to have something to say, and you have to be able to say something in a direct, straightforward way. I don't think you should take eight or ten syllables to say something you can say beautifully in three syllables. I mean, the most beautiful poetry, to my way of thinking, is still haiku. And you stop to think about poets like Whitman and poets like Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams. Their poetry was very uncomplicated, very straightforward.

Now, this passage is a Mother Lode of insight into McKuen's work. His poems show that he does think of poetry- writing as

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a lazy man's occupation. Few practicing artists deny what the Romantics called Inspiration, but few would suggest that a poet just wait around on great words to come; for if he does that--and Rod McKuen, sincere in this case, practices what he preaches--the words which come will likely be the easiest, and not the freshest or the most accurate.

As for these slurring remarks about industrious poets' being unsuccessful, I can't help thinking of Keats and Yeats, who revised extensively, sometimes--in Yeats's case--reshaping poems written many years before. I recall James Dickey's comments about his having written scores of versions of "Shark's Parlor," a lengthy poem to write even once. I think of ~~our current Pulitzer-prize-winning poet,~~ Robert Lowell, and his revision and recent republication of literally hundreds of poems. I think of Dylan Thomas, who, in terms of popular acclaim, with his public readings and enthusiastic cults, was a sort of Rod McKuen in his day. But Dylan Thomas was neither lazy nor particularly "straightforward" in his use of the English language. His poems were highly wrought, intricately formal at times, packed with thought and image, and--I believe--more profoundly and permanently affecting than the best of the sniveling introspections of Rod McKuen. (Dylan Thomas, by the way, was a literary forebear of Robert Zimmerman, who liked the poet's work so much that he took his name and became Bob Dylan, by all rights a better poet and song-writer than Mr. McKuen, our spokesman for the lonely tear in a cotton-candy

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world.) Dylan Thomas certainly allows himself nostalgia, but this is some of his language, ~~from a poem called "Fern Hill"~~.

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs

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Now the comparison is not entirely fair, I realize, but one thing stands absolutely clear--no matter how bad-off drunk Dylan Thomas might have been in his latter years, he would never have permitted himself such insensitive rhythms, such deadening clichés, and such rotten rimes as in these next lines, from the prolific Rod McKuen:

"Something More"

He'd walked all the roads there were to walk

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James Dickey has said that he wants his poetry to possess the clarity of the perfectly astonishing declarative sentence,

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but he means something like this, from "The Heaven of Animals":

Here they are. The soft eyes open.

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Listen now, by way of contrast, to the sort of declarative sentence that has made Rod McKuen the richest word-slinger in the West:

"Lonesome Cities"
There's a few more lonesome cities

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Obviously this is intended as a song, but I doubt that the voices in chorus of Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and Orpheus could have reanimated such stony clichés as crossing bridges, sowing wild oats, riding lonesome trains, and being a restless man.

The best image in the poem is the "wine of wandering" that the speaker still feels in himself; but it's not particularly original, and the image comes early, so that by the time we get to "I'll find out I still cannot run away from me," no single image could rescue this poem from its deep-cut rut.

A more recent poem is called simply "They," and its whole mood is spiritually acquiescent, a parallel to the artistic laziness McKuen strangely espouses as a cardinal poetic virtue:

"They"
They are meeting in rooms, or turning in hallways,

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McKuen has claimed Walt Whitman as his predominant influence, but that old original free-verser spent 35 years trying to get ~~his~~ Leaves of Grass right: no model there for lazy effusion. Whitman would not have had much sympathy with McKuen's comment that "Poetry is something that comes because you feel it and you want it to come."

But then I wonder just how responsible we can hold a man who with a straight face claims Whitman, Sandburg, Eliot, Auden, Ferlinghetti, Robert Bly, May Swenson, and Nikki Giovanni as his guiding lights in modern poetry; who magnanimously declares "The Waste Land" and "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" to be "two of the best poems ever written"; and who suffered so when his sheepdog died of an impacted wisdom tooth that he set up a tax-exempt foundation because "we needed a better breed of veterinarians." But I, at least, must be responsible and point out that McKuen does have a few mildly tolerable verses in his corpus, as we say. ~~("Corpus," by the way, is an apt metaphor if we may think of McKuen's "body" as sloughing off copious quantities of dead cells--these poems--every week.)~~ In his volume, Lonesome Cities, we find a satiric poem entitled "Heroes," in 1968 an easy topic to satirize, but nonetheless a fairly interesting, somewhat original set of images here:

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"Heroes"

Salute the G.I. coming from the green

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And, again from Lonesome Cities, another satiric poem, "Plan":

"Plan"

My cousin Max is being married

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Perhaps the worst effect of Rod McKuen's writing is that it gives some people who don't like poetry very much the opportunity to say, "This is what real poetry ought to be." But, if that's the case, then art and, more importantly, real life are not ~~what~~ as I at least have ~~thought of, and~~ lived ~~through~~ them. McKuen's solitary teardrop, melting its way through the spun sugar of his mind, will always be "true poetry" to some people; for Rod McKuen has touched the anti-intellectual, the escapist, the superficial, the blindly sentimental capacities of the American public. The malted-milk music of the Anita Kerr singers and McKuen's own shredded vocal cords help dull the listener's perceptions. But we can't just duck and say, "There ain't no accounting for taste," because tastes can be modified, and we are teachers.

So we must learn to answer the McKuen advocates by tough-minded comparisons, with good contemporary poets. When McKuen's virtues are listed, go not to Shakespeare, at least not at first ("He talks too funny"). Find where James Dickey, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, or Anne Sexton (at her recent best) speak clearly but richly about the real world and its resistance to categories, its ultimate rejection of false sentiment. Challenge the McKuen-lover to speak in detail of single poems and appropriate images, of good lines and honest, accurate words. We may yet rescue some of those perishing in the lachrymose quagmire of the K-Mart poetry bookshelf--over there--just under the Musak speaker in the ceiling!